

## Aim of lesson

The previous lesson has contrasted the Bible's teaching about the grave with some erroneous ideas. Now we look at 'Gehenna' and contrast the scriptural background with common misunderstandings about it.

The aim is that the young people will be able to understand and explain the New Testament references to hell fire.

## Bible background

Key references: Joshua 18:16; 2 Kings 23:10; 2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6; Mark 9:42-50.

## Preparation required

The previous lesson will have shown that the Greek word 'Hades' is the equivalent of the Hebrew 'Sheol' and both refer simply to the grave, i.e. the state of unconscious death.

There is another New Testament word translated hell (gehenna), which does NOT mean the grave, but whose meaning is not understood without examining its Old Testament background. This is the purpose of this lesson.

Look up all the passages where it occurs to see what they teach. Christendom Astray says this: "The word 'Gehenna' ought not to be translated at all. It is a proper name, and like all other proper names, should only have been transliterated. It is a Greek compound signifying the valley of the Son of Hinnom."

In this lesson we need to examine the history of this valley and what Jesus meant in using its name. You might like to ask the young people to read the historical passages before the lesson.

## Suggested outline of lesson

If the young people have not already read the historical section in the students' book, ask them to do so now and to answer the questions.

Now read together Mark 9:42-50 substituting 'rubbish dump' or similar expression for the word 'hell'.

Ask them if this now makes sense and point out that the whole passage in Mark is full of phrases which we should not take literally:-

v42: "millstone tied round neck"

v43: "if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off!"

v43: "... better to enter life maimed" (No one will)

v45: "cut your foot off..."

v47: "pluck out your eye"

v47: "enter the kingdom with one eye" (we will be healed.)

In just the same way:

v48: "with two eyes be thrown into Gehenna"

v49: "their worm does not die, and fire is not quenched."

are equally figurative. Does anyone really believe in immortal worms?

Thus Jesus uses "gehenna" to mean "the rubbish dump". We must avoid like the plague temptations which will get us thrown out of the city of the Great King, to be left on the scrap heap from which there will be no escape. The time of opportunity is in this life: there will be no second chance to purge our sins in a future "purgatory". This is the meaning of "unquenchable fire" - no second chance after this life.

Ask the students to look up Isaiah 66:24 and explain it then read again the second historical section. The 'unquenchable fire' is not an eternal torment, but a continual reminder to the living. It appears to be this same literal valley that is kept as a memorial outside Jerusalem to show to the visiting worshippers the fate of former rebellious people.

"Unquenchable fire" means that the fire will not go out until the burning object is totally destroyed. Otherwise, why is Jerusalem not still burning? See Jeremiah 17:27.

## **Relevance to our lives**

Whereas it is comforting to know that “hell-fires” do not await us when we die, we are taught throughout scripture that it is in this life that we have our chance to accept or reject God’s ways. While of course there is no literal place of eternal damnation in flames, there is a good reason why the scriptures use the analogy: to realise at the return of Christ that we have thrown away the opportunity of eternal life would cause us dreadful anguish which only death would extinguish.

## **Prayer**

Most holy Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was separate from sinners, who kept himself pure for your Glory; teach us in your mercy to love righteousness and hate wickedness in our own lives and to wait for you to save us from being thrown away at the last day. Amen.

## **Other suggestions for activities**

1. What does it mean to cut off hands, feet, eyes. Look at Deuteronomy 6:6-8. If not literal, what does it mean? Ask for examples. Give up smoking gradually or “cut it out!” Choice of friends; social activities; television - if your programme causes you to sin, switch it off! “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked.” Previous verses teach tolerance of someone else - these verses teach intolerance with one’s own sins. We must accept restrictions.
2. Read Jeremiah 19:1-15 and discuss how Jeremiah’s actions fit in with what you have learnt.